

Biblical Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: A New Interpretation of Jeremiah 30–33

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In a new approach, I interpret biblical prophecy in light of its ancient Near Eastern divinatory context and offer a new perspective on the (non)fulfillment of prophecy. I begin with a description of how divine communication was understood according to Mesopotamian and biblical texts, laying a foundation for comparative analysis. I then apply this approach to the prophecies of restoration in Jeremiah 30–33. I argue that the prophecies in these chapters, originally intended to be fulfilled in the postexilic era, were canceled (except 31:35–37, 33:19–26) and that a new decision or decisions were given to take their place. Nevertheless, these canceled prophecies continue to have great divinatory significance that reveals patterns of how the deity intends to bless and dwell among the people. Ultimately, a close reading of the text in the light of its ancient Near Eastern contexts provides a strong corrective to the ways that these chapters are commonly interpreted.

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.... Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”

—Ebenezer Scrooge (Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*)

In the Hebrew Bible, the human acquisition of knowledge of the future comes through divination, that is, communication between humans and the divine.¹

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¹The term *divination* in the context of Hebrew Bible studies has been used primarily in reference to techniques of communication with the gods that are deemed inappropriate according to the instruction of the Torah (see esp. Deut 18:9–14). See John W. Hilber, “Prophecy, Divination,

There are two primary ways the Hebrew Bible speaks of events and situations in the future, each with its own unique complexities. One is through the irrevocable promises of God expressed primarily, but not exclusively, in the covenants. Although most of the biblical covenants have conditional aspects, especially concerning who gets to experience the blessings of the promises and when, the covenant promises are certain in that their ultimate fulfillment is reliant solely on God.² The promises are to be understood as eventualities, guaranteed of their fulfillment. Yet most of the depictions of the future in the Hebrew Bible are not promises but may be generically labeled as future prophecy.³ Scholarly attention is frequently given to other issues that affect the meaning of future prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, but perhaps one of the most far-reaching issues pertains to its nature and function.

Although excellent research has been done on the nature and function of future prophecy in the Bible and the ancient Near East, biblical interpreters have failed to apply this research correctly and consistently to biblical prophecy.⁴ For instance, many scholars treat the future prophecies in Jer 30–33 as promises, as if they were guaranteed and sure to be fulfilled.⁵ Since these prophecies were not

and Magic in the Ancient Near East,” in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 368–74, here 368. The term *divination* is used here, however, to refer to all kinds of communication techniques including prophecy (see below).

²See Bruce K. Waltke, “The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants,” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 123–39; Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 94, 99, 207; Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008) 165, 233–34.

³For discussion of the modern categories of divination and the difficulty of producing clear, specific definitions for words like *prophecy* and *divination* as they apply to the ancient Near East, see Martti Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective,” in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East; Essays in Honor of Herbert B. Huffman*, ed. John Kaltner and Louis Stulman, JSOTSup 378 (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 17–37, here 17–25; Nissinen, “Prophecy and Omen Divination: Two Sides of the Same Coin,” in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus et al., OIS 6 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010), 341–51, here 341–47; Jonathan Stökl, “How Unique Was Israelite Prophecy?,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of Jews and Judaism*, ed. Alan T. Levenson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 53–69, here 53–64; Hilber, “Prophecy, Divination, and Magic,” 368.

⁴The term *prophecy* is used here in a broad sense that includes originally oral prophecies as well as the many later additions and redactional layers of these chapters. These matters will be discussed further below.

⁵Specifically regarding Jer 31:31–34 as a “promise,” see Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, WBC 27 (Waco, TX: Word, 1995), 130–32; Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 317; Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, 191; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 196; Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 376; Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 269; Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework*

realized in the postexilic era, some scholars conclude that they are failed prophecies, while others find their fulfillment many centuries later or even still in the eschaton.⁶ Further, there are those who do not even raise the question of when or if these prophecies have been or will be fulfilled.⁷ Yet, in light of the divinatory nature of future prophecy, there is no reason to believe that these future prophecies of postexilic restoration in Jer 30–33 are promises, and consequently the common interpretations of these prophecies are fraught with misunderstandings.

In this study, I propose a comparative approach to biblical prophecy that (1) interprets biblical prophecy in light of its ancient Near Eastern divinatory context, though not to the exclusion of other methods, and (2) offers a new perspective on the (non)fulfillment of prophecy. I begin with a description of how divine communication was understood according to Mesopotamian and biblical texts.⁸ I discuss technical and intuitive types of divination as well as the underpinnings that unite them in terms of their nature and function. I show that technical divination and intuitive divination are contingent in nature, meaning that the fulfillment of future prophecy is not guaranteed but is contingent on human response or a change in divine will. Functionally, future prophecy alerts humans to divine decisions, giving them the opportunity to respond in a way that can impact whether the gods might change their minds. I also describe the process by which the writing of biblical prophecy became an act of technical divination, which means that it shares the very same underpinnings as technical divination and provides a model for how to understand new meanings of divinatory texts in new contexts.

Once the foundation of conceptual overlap in Mesopotamian and biblical divination (technical and intuitive) is laid,⁹ I illustrate the proposed method via the text of Jer 30–33. Scholars have offered many interpretations of the prophecies in

of *God's Grand Plan of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 280–86; John Goldingay, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 658; cf. Derek Kidner, *Jeremiah*, Kidner Classic Commentaries (1987; repr., Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 110–12.

⁶For the idea of failed prophecies, see Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979), esp. 157–83; Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 198–225. Proponents of later or future fulfillment of the prophecies will be discussed below.

⁷Regarding Jer 31:31–34, see, e.g., William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 26–52*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 148–201; Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, 130–35.

⁸“We always primarily compare *sources* (texts, images, artifacts) and only secondarily *realities*, which can be constructed only from the evidence provided by the sources” (Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017], 47).

⁹There are, of course, significant differences between Mesopotamian and biblical divination, but I focus on the points of similarity in this study.

these chapters regarding whether they have or will be fulfilled, but the nature and function of prophecy and divination in the ancient Near East suggest a different explanation. When a prophecy (or other divinatory “message”) was received but did not come to pass, an ancient Mesopotamian or Judean would assume that there had been a change of mind on the part of the deity, thereby canceling the prophecy, whether for the deity’s own reasons or because of human response. The deity, therefore, had made a different decision. When prophecies were written down, however, they took on new divinatory significance for later readers and subsequent generations. I argue that the interpretation of biblical prophecy and its fulfillment (or lack thereof) should be done in a manner that is consistent with its divinatory context, and I offer a new interpretation of the prophecies of restoration in Jer 30–33, arguing that the future prophecies in these chapters refer to divine decisions that were canceled and then replaced with new divine decisions.

I. TOWARD A COMPARATIVE METHOD FOR INTERPRETING BIBLICAL PROPHECY

In the ancient Near East, there was no concept of the construct we refer to as “nature”; therefore, there were no “natural laws” to govern the world, and causation was ascribed to the divine rather than to principles of nature.¹⁰ As a result, knowledge of the future was possible only through divination, that is, communication with the gods, with prophecy being one of those techniques.¹¹ Divination techniques are of two kinds: *technical* and *intuitive*.¹² Whereas technical divination requires skilled interpreters who have studied and are able to read and interpret the signs, intuitive divination does not require the technical knowledge of a scholar

¹⁰Francesca Rochberg, *Before Nature: Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 38–58, 170–76; Stefan M. Maul, “Divination Culture and the Handling of the Future,” in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick, Routledge Worlds (New York: Routledge, 2007), 361–77, here 362.

¹¹Rochberg, *Before Nature*, 169; cf. Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy?,” 21–22; Nissinen, “Prophecy and Omen Divination,” 341; Jo Ann Scurlock, “Prophecy as a Form of Divination: Divination as a Form of Prophecy,” in Annus et al., *Divination and Interpretation of Signs*, 277–316, here 305; Stökl, “How Unique Was Israelite Prophecy?,” 55; Stökl, “A Royal Advisory Service: Prophecy and the State in Mesopotamia,” in *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context*, ed. Christopher A. Rollston (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 87–114, here 87; Seth Sanders, “Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre: First Isaiah as an Instance of Ancient Near Eastern Text-Building,” *HBAI* 6 (2017): 26–52, here 31.

¹²Stökl, “How Unique Was Israelite Prophecy?,” 55; see also Martti Nissinen, with contributions by C. L. Seow and Robert K. Ritner, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Peter Machinist, WAW 12 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 1–2; Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy?,” 20–22; Manfred Weippert, *Götterwort in Menschenmund: Studien zur Prophetie in Assyrien, Israel und Juda*, FRLANT 252 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 89.

(i.e., a diviner).¹³ Although technical and intuitive divination are methodologically achieved in different ways, they are “two sides of the same coin” in that they share a “conceptual, intellectual, and ideological basis” that functions as the foundation of all divination, including prophecy.¹⁴ This principle enables meaningful comparison between them.¹⁵

Technical divination techniques include the interpretation of “symbolic” dreams and the reading and interpretation of omens, which were considered the writings of the gods.¹⁶ The gods “wrote” their decisions in the sky, on animal entrails (especially the sheep’s liver), in strange births (such as animals with two heads), and in various terrestrial scenarios to be read and interpreted by skilled scholars.¹⁷ Intuitive divination, on the other hand, is restricted to messages from the gods whose meaning does not require a scholar’s interpretation. The gods gave their messages directly to prophets and dreamers.¹⁸

In the following, I outline technical and intuitive forms of divination in Mesopotamia as well as divination in the Hebrew Bible in order to form a foundation of common ground shared between them. In sections I.A–I.C, I argue that Mesopotamian and biblical divination, unless otherwise clearly indicated, were understood to be conditional in nature. Beginning with Mesopotamia and then turning to the Hebrew Bible, I describe how technical and intuitive divination techniques revealed the future and how human responses to those messages impacted whether the potential future events depicted therein were realized or not. I then contend, in

¹³Scurlock, “Prophecy as a Form of Divination,” 305; Stökl, “How Unique Was Israelite Prophecy?,” 55; Sanders, “Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre,” 33.

¹⁴Nissinen, “Prophecy and Omen Divination,” 345.

¹⁵See Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 44: “The comparative material not only enables examining biblical prophecy as a part of a larger religio-historical context but also improves our historical interpretation of the prophetic phenomenon.”

¹⁶On interpretation of dreams, see A. Leo Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East: With a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book*, TAPS 46.3 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956), 179–363, here 206–25; on omens, see Rochberg, *Before Nature*, 170–76.

¹⁷Stökl, “How Unique Was Israelite Prophecy?,” 54–55; Marc Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 89.

¹⁸Weippert includes dreams under prophecy, which underlines their similarity (*Götterwort in Menschenmund*, 88). However, there is significance in distinguishing them. See Dominique Charpin, “Le contexte historique et géographique des prophéties dans les textes retrouvés à Mari,” *Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies* 23 (1992): 21–31, here 21, 26–27; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien: Formen der Kommunikation zwischen Gott und König im 2. und 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, SAAS 10 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1999), 47–127. Charpin has noted that certain Old Babylonian texts seem to imply that the distinction was that “dreams” (*šuttum*) were “seen,” while “prophecies” (*igirrûm*) were “heard” (*Gods, Kings, and Merchants in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia*, Publications de l’Institut du Proche-Orient ancien du Collège de France 2 [Leuven: Peeters, 2015], 36).

section I.D, that the evidence indicates that if a prophecy or divinatory message was not realized, ancient Mesopotamians and Judeans would have believed that the divine decision expressed in that prophecy or divinatory message had been canceled and replaced with another decision. In section I.E, I summarize the shared conceptual foundation of Mesopotamian and biblical divination.

This shared conceptual foundation raises several important questions regarding biblical prophecy that I address in subsequent sections, where I illustrate the proposed approach via the prophecies of Jer 30–33 (section II) and discuss the continued divinatory significance of texts that record prophecies that were canceled (section III).

A. Technical Divination in Mesopotamia

Most technical divination techniques involve the reading of omens, that is, “clearly defined perception[s] understood as sign[s] pointing to future events.”¹⁹ Omens were recorded in long lists, each one expressed in a conditional proposition: when X (a given phenomenon), then Y (the corresponding future phenomenon).²⁰ In order for the messages of the gods to be interpretable, certain assumptions were made; for example, it was assumed that when a given phenomenon (X) occurred, it was regularly followed by another specific phenomenon (Y).²¹ Although it may seem strange to the modern mind to think that there could be a connection between the shape or coloration of a sheep’s liver and the future, there was a clear sense of logic and system to the reading and interpreting of omens. Technical divination makes connections between the signs and their portended meanings through a system of analogy, resemblance, and inference.²² In other words, “X implied Y because Y resembled X.”²³ The “correspondence” of a phenomenon and the future it indicated “was based frequently upon analogies and associations between words for, or spellings of words for, things.”²⁴ Consider the following examples.

(a) YOS 10 44.19

šumma šēpum war[k]assa pa[t]er,²⁵ šēp īrubakkum tušadda

If—concerning the foot [šēpum]—its back is loose, you will destroy
the expedition [šēp] that (has) attacked you. (my translation)

¹⁹ Maul, “Divination Culture,” 361.

²⁰ Francesca Rochberg, “‘If P, Then Q’: Form and Reasoning in Babylonian Divination,” in Annus et al., *Divination and Interpretation of Signs*, 19–27.

²¹ Rochberg, *Before Nature*, 240.

²² Rochberg, “‘If P, Then Q’” 25.

²³ Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks*, 121.

²⁴ Rochberg, *Before Nature*, 165.

²⁵ Because the subject is a feminine noun, the expected form of the verb is *paṭrat* (G stative third-person feminine singular).

(b) YOS 10 11 v 1–2

šumma mašrah martim kunnuš, šarrum nakrum ana šarrim ikannuš

If the cystic duct of the gall bladder is bent [*kunnuš*], a foreign king will bow down [*ikannuš*] to the king. (my translation)

In these examples, a key word in the protasis corresponds phonetically (examples [a] and [b]) or semantically (example [b]) to a key word in the apodosis. In both cases, the future portended by the sign in some way resembles the sign itself.²⁶

It is of great interest in this study that omen lists contain omens that are extremely unlikely to occur, if not impossible, leading to the conclusion that such omens were academically created.²⁷ For example,

(c) YOS 10 44.69

šumma sebe šēpētum, rabûm kabtum ana mâtika iṭeḥḥeakkum

If there are seven feet, an honored noble will approach your land. (my translation).

This illustrates that the omen lists are “not records of observations, but methodical explorations of all divine signs and their implications.”²⁸ Absurd, or academically created, omens were discerned through a process of closely studying the patterns and implications of other, written omens. In other words, these omens are the result of a form of scribal divination, something that is created in the world of the written word.²⁹

The future portended by an omen was not thought to be immutable, as if it were depicting an unchangeable fate.³⁰ Rather, the future portended by an omen was a “shadow of things that may be only,”³¹ as there were techniques (called *namburbî*) that could be used to negate an undesirable or evil omen. In fact, the purpose of the *namburbî* rituals and incantations was “to ‘undo’ or ‘avert’ portended evil.”³²

²⁶Sign-acts in Mari (Charpin, *Gods, Kings, and Merchants*, 55) and the Bible (e.g., Jer 1:11–12) often use a similar style of wordplay; see Jonathan Stökl, “Prophetic Hermeneutics in the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia,” *HBAI* 4 (2015): 267–92, here 280–83.

²⁷This pertains to the formation of biblical prophetic books; see below I.C.

²⁸Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks*, 101, 116.

²⁹Van De Mieroop explains the presence of “purely made-up” words in lexical lists (*Philosophy before the Greeks*, 42), impractical laws in the so-called law codes (163), and impossible omens in omen lists (116), as a result of the pursuit of truth as scribes “dealt with written reality, not with physical reality” (42).

³⁰Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 12. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer has argued that this strongly contrasts with the idea of fate found in Greek thinking (“Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy—The Strategic Uses of Foreknowledge,” *ZAW* 117 [2005]: 329–50, here 331–32).

³¹To borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens (Ebenezer Scrooge to the last of the three spirits in *A Christmas Carol* [1843]).

³²Richard I. Caplice, *The Akkadian Namburbi Texts: An Introduction*, SANE 1.1 (Los

Signs could also cancel each other out, indicating that the gods had changed their minds. However, if no sign occurred to cancel out an evil omen and no apotropaic magic, prayers, incantations, or rituals were employed, the assumption is that the future portended by the omen would in fact occur.³³ This is explained in the Diviner's Manual, a seventh-century BCE Babylonian text, which states:

When you look up a sign (in these omen collections) be it one in the sky or one on earth and if that sign's evil is confirmed(?) then it has indeed occurred with regard to you in reference to an enemy or to a disease or to a famine. Check (then) the date of that sign and should no sign have occurred to counteract that sign, should no annulment have taken place, one cannot make (it) pass by, its evil (consequences) cannot be removed (and) it will happen. (translation by Oppenheim)³⁴

Nevertheless, even if the portended future of an omen was canceled, the sign itself was believed to reveal the same divine decision every time the sign appeared.³⁵

It should also be recognized that omens have a sort of "shelf life" referred to as a stipulated term, or period of time in which they are valid. Nils P. Heeßel has shown that the stipulated times of liver omens were mathematically calculated based on the number and location of marks on the "finger" (*ubānu*), that is, a certain part of the liver. He found that "extispicy results had a limited validity that seldom exceeded one year."³⁶

B. Intuitive Divination in Mesopotamia

Intuitive divination is also intended to reveal, as one Old Babylonian text from Eshnunna says, the "secrets of the gods" (*nišrētim ša ili*) (FLP 1674 line 3).³⁷ Intuitive divination comes in the form of human language, spoken by the deity to the prophet or dreamer. Just as in technical divination, the secrets or decisions of the gods revealed through intuitive divination are implicitly conditional, though some prophecies are explicitly contingent on the response of the audience. The Mari letters contain records of many prophetic utterances, but the authors of these letters (who were not the prophets or dreamers themselves) often provided additional

Angeles: Undena, 1974), 7. According to Caplice (8), the Sumerian NAM.BÚR.BI "may be translated '(ritual for) undoing of it (i.e. of the portended evil),' or simply 'apotropaion.'"

³³Rochberg, *Before Nature*, 240–41; cf. Maul, "Divination Culture," 362; Scurlock, "Prophecy as a Form of Divination," 283. It is this certainty that has led Rochberg to posit that the durative (*iparras*), often found in the apodoses of omens, is used as a future ("will") rather than a modal ("shall/may/might") (244).

³⁴A. L. Oppenheim, "A Babylonian Diviner's Manual," *JNES* 33.2 (1974), 197–220, here 204.

³⁵This provides an important parallel to canceled prophecy, discussed below.

³⁶Nils P. Heeßel, "The Calculation of the Stipulated Term in Extispicy," in Annus et al., *Divination and Interpretation of Signs*, 163–75, here 168.

³⁷For translation, see Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 94.

context or even their own suggestions for how to interpret the prophecies or dreams.³⁸ In a letter that contains an explicitly conditional prophecy (A. 1121 + A. 2731), Adad informs Zimri-Lim, the king of Mari, that, if he obeys his commands, he will increase Zimri-Lim's kingdom. But if Zimri-Lim does not listen to Adad, the god will take the kingdom away from him.³⁹ The message is clear and direct, not needing to be interpreted by a skilled diviner.

Since the extant texts that record prophetic utterances are connected to the royal court, the audience is primarily a king or a royal official, and most of the prophecies speak boldly of the blessing, protection, or deliverance of the king. Many of these future prophecies, and particularly the Neo-Assyrian prophecies, seem so certain that it is difficult at times to imagine that they could be conditional. There is, however, an assumption that the king will continue his service of the deity. If he were simply to stop, he would put these prophecies in jeopardy; in other words, he would risk the deity changing the outcome. Like prophecy in the Bible, the Mesopotamian texts do not consist entirely of future prophecy, as there is often hortatory material and descriptions of how the god has worked on the king's behalf in the past or descriptions of the problem that the god now seeks to address. One such nonfuture prophecy in a Neo-Assyrian text (SAA 9 3.5 lines 16–37)⁴⁰ is notably helpful in elucidating the fact that the prophecies are implicitly conditioned on the king and his faithful or negligent service of the gods. In this text, Ishtar complains that, despite her generosity toward Esarhaddon, she has not been well cared for in return. She states that she needs food and beer and demands that it be given. Though it is not stated explicitly, one may very well infer that, if her demands are not met, she will not continue her generosity toward the king. As a result, even the most confident-sounding prophecies, with rare exception, should be considered contingent on the response of the audience.

C. Divination in the Hebrew Bible: Its Nature and Purpose

Divination in the Hebrew Bible is a complicated matter: the techniques explicitly condoned are primarily intuitive (specifically prophecy and nonsymbolic dreams),⁴¹ while the creation of the texts themselves ventures into the realm of

³⁸Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 75, 83.

³⁹For text and translation, see Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 17–21. See also Stökl, "Prophetic Hermeneutics in the Hebrew Bible" 276–77.

⁴⁰For translation, see Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 122–24.

⁴¹Most forms of technical divination are not condoned, but the Hebrew Bible does allow for some. The practice of casting lots (e.g., Lev 16:8, Num 26:55), the use of an ephod as an oracle (e.g., 1 Sam 23:6–14), and the Urim and Thummim (Exod 28:30, Lev 8:8) are all forms of technical divination, though they do not seem to require the extensive study and skill that the most important forms of Mesopotamian divination (such as extispicy or astrology) required. The Hebrew Bible also contains divination from dreams, some of which were symbolic and required the interpretation of a diviner (e.g., the dreams in the stories of Joseph and Daniel) while others were not

technical divination. When prophetic utterances are written and collected with “minimal annotations” and no narrative or epistolary context, the resulting text is what Martti Nissinen calls “written prophecy.”⁴² Texts of written prophecy were created in order to reuse and reinterpret oral or other written prophecies “in a new historical context.”⁴³ The Neo-Assyrian texts provide an illustrative example, as the prophetic utterances, encouraging Esarhaddon in his return to Nineveh and his ascension to the throne, were assembled into collections (SAA 9:1–3) near the end of his reign, probably to emphasize his divine right of kingship and ultimately that of his heir when he died.⁴⁴ It is likely that some of the sources of the biblical prophetic books were written prophecy, but the books as we know them today underwent further development.

Biblical prophecy is a unique kind of literary prophecy that developed beyond collections of prophecies into prophetic books. Oral, and probably written, prophecies that were considered significant by later scribes and communities were collected, closely examined, interpreted, reinterpreted, edited, amplified, harmonized, and arranged by scribes for decades and even centuries after the life of the prophet.⁴⁵ In the process, these scribes functioned as (technical) diviners, taking on a “role closely related to prophecy” and composing texts that were understood to be inspired by God.⁴⁶ “The inspired exercise of wisdom” and its application in the scribal process (editing, adding, reinterpreting, etc.) “became an act of divination” that resulted in the creation of “new prophecy.”⁴⁷ Although Mesopotamian texts did not develop into prophetic books, the scribal activity that gave shape to the biblical prophetic books is, in some ways, similar to the academic creation of omens or lexical items found in Mesopotamian texts, as the scribes responsible for these texts were interested in discovering the truth, which could be obtained only through methodical study and explanation.⁴⁸ The original prophetic utterances may have been for a specific audience at a certain time and place; but, once written, they were understood as having new and/or continued divinatory (or revelatory) significance and authority beyond their original historical contexts, extending to those communities who valued them.

(e.g., Jacob’s dream in Gen 28:12–15). See Jonathan Stökl, “Daniel and the ‘Prophetization’ of Dream Divination,” in *Perchance to Dream: Dream Divination in the Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Esther J. Hamori and Jonathan Stökl, ANEM 21 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 133–56.

⁴²Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 93.

⁴³Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 100.

⁴⁴Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 103–4, 158.

⁴⁵Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 149–62.

⁴⁶Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 154; cf. William M. Schniedewind, *The Word of God in Transition: From Prophet to Exegete in the Second Temple Period*, JSOTSup 197 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 232–59.

⁴⁷Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 154, 147.

⁴⁸On academically created divination through the study of texts, see Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks*, 101.

Contingency in Biblical Prophecy

Just as the Babylonian Diviner's Manual makes it clear that the future portended in omen literature could be changed through human response, so also the Hebrew Bible does for the prophecy in Jer 18:1–11. This passage unambiguously explains that future prophecies from God are conditioned upon the response of the audience; judgment can be canceled because of repentance, while deliverance and blessing can be canceled because of evil deeds and disobedience. Like the Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian prophecies, biblical prophecies are sometimes explicitly conditional (e.g., Jer 17:19–27), but they are mostly implicitly conditional.⁴⁹ Jonah's prophecy—"forty days and Nineveh is overturned" (Jonah 3:4)—was canceled because the king and the people of the city humbled themselves (Jonah 3:6–10). Similarly, the prophecy given by the prophet Micah that Zion would be destroyed (Mic 3:12) was not explicitly conditional, and yet in light of Jer 26:18–19, it seems that the future prophecy was canceled because Hezekiah feared the Lord and entreated his favor.⁵⁰ Many other passages could be added to these, but these texts clearly illustrate that future prophecy is understood as conditional; its fulfillment is contingent on human response, even if it is not explicitly marked as such.

Some prophecies, however, are explicitly unconditional. Richard L. Pratt has identified such prophecies as those that have specific assurances or oaths regarding their fulfillment.⁵¹ Such assurances include the Lord's command to Jeremiah not to pray for the people (Jer 7:16, 11:14, 14:11) or a statement that he would not relent (Jer 4:28) or turn back (Jer 23:20), while oaths use the typical language of oaths such as *נשבועתי* ("I swear/have sworn ...," Jer 49:13), *אני נשאתי את ידי* ("I raised my hand ...," Ezek 20:23), or *חי אני* ("as I live ...," Ezek 14:16).⁵² But the vast majority of future prophecies are contingent, or conditional, in nature.⁵³

The nature of future prophecy in the Bible has often been described in biblical studies with the text of Deut 18:21–22 [Eng. 20–21] in mind.

⁴⁹Tiemeyer, "Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy," 349; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic," *JETS* 53 (2010): 561–77, here 563; Scurlock, "Prophecy as a Form of Divination," 305; Stökl, "Prophetic Hermeneutics in the Hebrew Bible," 270–71.

⁵⁰Some would say that it was merely delayed, but see below.

⁵¹Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 180–203, here 185–87). Chisholm refers to such predictions as being "predictive performative" ("When Prophecy Appears to Fail," 562).

⁵²Pratt, "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," 185–87. R. B. Chisholm Jr. makes a similar distinction between "decrees or oaths," which are unconditional, and "announcements" which are conditional ("Does God 'Change his Mind'?", *BSac* 152 [1995]: 387–99, here 389).

⁵³This distinction is apparent in Ezekiel 20 as the text differentiates between things that God "said" (vv. 8, 13, 21), each of which was canceled, and things that he swore by lifting his hand in a solemn oath (vv. 5, 6, 15, 23, 28), all of which came to be.

(d) Deut. 18:21–22 [Eng. 20–21]

וכי תאמר בלבבך איכה נדע את־הדבר אשר לא־דברו יהוה: אשר ידבר הנביא
בשם יהוה ולא־יהיה הדבר ולא יבוא הוא הדבר אשר לא־דברו יהוה בזדון דברו
הנביא לא תגור ממנו:

And if you say in your heart, “How will we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?,” that which the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, the word will not be and it will not come. That is the word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. Do not fear him. (my translation)

The interpretations of many scholars have faltered over these verses, with the main problem being that they are taken “at face value.”⁵⁴ Some scholars take this to mean that every future prophecy from a true prophet must come true, thus resisting, if not denying, the idea of conditionality in future prophecy.⁵⁵ Other scholars find these verses to be in contradiction with the testimony of the prophetic books, as illustrated above.⁵⁶ Yet, in light of the fact that all forms of divination in Mesopotamia and the Bible are, unless otherwise indicated, expected to be contingent, it seems better to understand this passage to mean that, if nothing should happen that would cancel the prophecy, the prophecy of a true prophet would come true.⁵⁷

The contingent nature of future prophecy leads one to the question of its purpose. If future prophecy was not intended to tell the future before it happened, what was it intended to do? The purpose of future prophecy, and in fact of all forms of divination in the ancient Near East, was “to provide decisionmakers with the information that they needed in order to make their decisions” and to motivate the audience to live in a way that pleased the divine.⁵⁸ A future prophecy of calamity warned the audience of what would come if the expectations of the deity were not met, while future prophecies of blessing were intended to motivate the audience to be loyal and obedient by showing what good things they could be a part of if they listened to the deity and obeyed (e.g., Joel 2:12–14, Jer 36:2–7, Ezek 3:16–21).⁵⁹

⁵⁴Stökl, “Prophetic Hermeneutics in the Hebrew Bible,” 271.

⁵⁵Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974), 188–90; cf. Robert R. Wilson, “Early Israelite Prophecy,” in *Interpreting the Prophets*, ed. James Luther Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 1–13, here 10.

⁵⁶E.g., Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 185–88; Stökl, “Prophetic Hermeneutics in the Hebrew Bible,” 271.

⁵⁷Cf. Pratt, “Historical Contingencies,” 188. Chisholm suggests that this assumption applied only to unconditional prophecies (“When Prophecy Appears to Fail,” 575–76), but that seems less likely in light of the common assumptions of predictive prophecy in the ancient Near East.

⁵⁸Stökl, “Prophetic Hermeneutics in the Hebrew Bible,” 268; cf. Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien*, 286–95; Nissinen, “Prophecy and Omen Divination,” 345–47. Tiemeyer has shown that this is the case with the oracles in Samuel and Kings (“Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy,” 329–50).

⁵⁹See Patrick Fairbairn, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (1856; repr., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 70; Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, 67; Tiemeyer, “Prophecy as a Way of Cancelling Prophecy,” 349; Chisholm, “When Prophecy Appears to Fail,” 563–68.

D. Divine Decisions, Canceled and Replaced

When a divine decision, communicated through technical or intuitive methods, was canceled, it might be replaced with another divine decision. In one of Esarhaddon's inscriptions, Babylonian Prism A (column ii), the god Marduk changed his mind about the city of Babylon, canceling his original decision and replacing it with a new one.⁶⁰ Marduk became angry with Babylon and decided that it would be destroyed and would lie fallow for seventy years. After the city was destroyed, however, Marduk was appeased after a short time and mercifully changed his mind. His new decision was that the city would lie desolate for only eleven years instead of seventy.⁶¹ This new decision was discerned and confirmed through omens that repeatedly signaled Marduk's favor on the rebuilding of Babylon and Esagil, Marduk's temple. The new decision was still on the same trajectory as the earlier one (i.e., a period of judgment followed by restoration), but it was lessened in severity.

One might compare Marduk's changing his decision with the two occasions in the Pentateuch when God was angry with the Israelites to the point that he said he would wipe them out and start over with Moses (Exod 32–33, Num 14). Both times God gave his decision to Moses, who then pleaded with the Lord not to do this. God relented from the judgment (Exod 32:14, Num 14:20) but still punished the people, though with a much less severe judgment than was initially stated (Exod 32:35, Num 14:21–23). The initial decisions of Marduk and the biblical God were not partially fulfilled, nor were they fulfilled in a vague way. They were repealed or canceled, and then a new decision was given.⁶² The final decisions in these passages were still on the same trajectory as the initial prophecies (i.e., judgment for sin), but they were diminished in severity because of human response (i.e., the intervention of Moses).

E. The Cultural and Conceptual Context of Divinatory Texts

Biblical and Mesopotamian divinatory texts share several fundamental beliefs that underpin their perceptions of divine communication, including the following: (1) causation in the world is the domain of the divine (not natural principles or law); (2) the only way to know the future (or “shadows of things that may be”) is through divination; (3) divine communication, via technical and intuitive divination,

⁶⁰For text and translation, see Erle Leichty, with a contribution by Grant Frame, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)*, RINAP 4 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 196–97.

⁶¹When the signs for the number seventy, written with a vertical wedge and a Winkelhacken, are reversed, the signs read as the number eleven. The decision of Marduk was to reverse the signs, making the judgment eleven years instead of seventy. See Leichty, *Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon*, 196.

⁶²This interpretation is supported by Ezekiel's retelling of these events (Ezek 20:5–26).

reflects divine decisions; (4) unless otherwise indicated, the realization of these divine decisions is contingent on human response and/or a change in divine will (i.e., they are inherently conditional); (5) human response and/or a change in divine will can result in the cancelation of a divine decision; and (6) if a divine decision is canceled, a new decision may be given in its place.⁶³

The method I am proposing interprets biblical prophecy, insofar as it is possible, in a manner that is consistent with the underpinnings it shares with Mesopotamian divinatory texts. The first four concepts are universal in Mesopotamian and biblical prophecy (and other forms of divination), but we do not always have enough information to determine if a particular prophecy was canceled or whether a new decision was given. In such cases, we can only wonder if the prophecy was realized or canceled and lean into other methods of analysis. It is often the case, however, that we are able to deduce from other textual and historical information whether a prophecy was canceled. For instance, the Mari letters record that Shamash told Zimri-Lim (ARM 26:194 :32–43) that he would defeat Hammurabi, take possession of his land, and declare an edict of remission (*andurārum*). Yet we know from historical records that the ultimate outcome was roughly the opposite. Therefore, despite the lack of texts stating that this prophecy was canceled or why, we can deduce that it was.⁶⁴ Below, I apply this line of deductive reasoning to Jer 30–33.

II. CANCELED PROPHECIES OF RESTORATION

In the following sections, I turn to the depiction of restoration offered in Jer 30–33. I begin with a brief introduction to these chapters and then summarize their descriptions of restoration. I then argue that, with a few exceptions, the future prophecies of these chapters would have been understood by ancient Judeans not to be partially fulfilled, failed, or far into the future but rather as canceled and replaced with other decisions.

A. *Jeremiah 30–33*

Jeremiah 30–33 consists of three units that are juxtaposed for their thematic connections. The first literary unit is chapters 30–31, often called the Book of Consolation (see 30:2). This unit is ostensibly composite, consisting of visions or dreams

⁶³This list is foundational for the study of biblical and Mesopotamian divination but is by no means exhaustive; see, e.g., Scott B. Noegel, “‘Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign’: Script, Power, and Interpretation in the Ancient Near East,” in Annus et al., *Divination and Interpretation of Signs*, 143–62.

⁶⁴One could argue that the prophecy failed or was merely the creation of human imagination, but that would not be consistent with a perspective from within the divinatory system (i.e., its cultural and conceptual context) (see below).

(30:5b–6; 31:7, 15–26)⁶⁵ as well as a variety of relatively early and late (prophetic-) scribal additions and insertions.⁶⁶ This unit does not have a date formula or time reference in the initial verses, but the hope of restoration expressed in these chapters is very reminiscent of that found in other prophetic books of the exilic period (esp. Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel), which may indicate an exilic date for most of the additions.⁶⁷ Some scholars consider the source material reflective of the same time period depicted in the following unit, chapter 32.⁶⁸

The second unit is a narrative sign-act report with its accompanying prophecy. Chapter 32 describes events dated to the last days of Zedekiah, as Nebuchadnezzar and his army besieged the city of Jerusalem (vv. 1–2). Jeremiah was instructed to purchase (redeem) a field from his cousin in Benjamin. In chapter 37, Jeremiah went to inspect that field while the Babylonians had briefly withdrawn in light of a potential Egyptian conflict, but when he went to leave the city, he was seized and imprisoned in the court of the guard. That is the setting for the prophecies of the third unit, chapter 33 (v. 1). This third unit has two distinct parts: verses 1–13, which is the prophecy received in the court of the guard, and verses 14–26, which consists of three subunits that are thematically linked. The depictions of restoration found in these chapters are most likely also from the exilic period,⁶⁹ with the possible exception of 33:14–26, which is not in the Old Greek (OG).

The content of these chapters has been set in a time when judgment, in the form of Nebuchadnezzar and his army, was knocking on the door. God had warned and pleaded with the kings and people many times, but they had repeatedly chosen to disobey. As a result, God brought judgment on Judah and Jerusalem, and yet, even in the last and darkest days of the southern kingdom, the Lord gave the people hope.⁷⁰ Jeremiah 30–33 depicts a great time of restoration that was portended to come after the city was conquered and the people were exiled. The Lord says that he will “gather them from all the countries” to which he drove them (32:37) and that he will remove the yoke from their neck and burst their bonds, so that they will no longer serve foreigners but rather their own Davidic king (30:8–9, 33:15–16 [lacking in the OG]). The city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt (30:17–18, 31:4, 33:7),

⁶⁵ See Daniel E. Carver, “Vision Signals and the Language of Vision Descriptions in the Prophets,” *JSOT* 45 (2021): 1–17.

⁶⁶ Cf. Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 568–70; Ronald E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 175–77; Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 155–67; Douglas Rawlinson Jones, *Jeremiah*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 370–73; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 333.

⁶⁷ For other evidences of an exilic date, see William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 154–57; cf. Allen, *Jeremiah*, 333–57. It is possible, however, that some additions (e.g., 30:10–11 [= 46:27–28], which is not in the OG) may have been postexilic (Allen, *Jeremiah*, 336–37).

⁶⁸ Clements, *Jeremiah*, 176; cf. Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 165.

⁶⁹ Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 154–57.

⁷⁰ Cf. Clements, *Jeremiah*, 176.

and the people will dwell in the land God promised to give their ancestors and they will grow and enjoy its bounty (31:2–5, 33:10–13). Land will be bought and sold again (32:42–44). God's people will be forgiven of their sins (31:34, 33:8) and will enjoy a right covenantal relationship with God again that was mediated by the Levitical priests and right sacrifices (33:18, 21–22 [lacking in the OG]). The texts state that there will be a “new” (31:31) and “eternal covenant” (32:40) between the Lord and the people, and that the instruction of God will be written on the hearts of the people (31:33). The Lord also states that he will give the people “one heart” and “one way” in order that they might “fear” him forever (32:39). He also added that he will put the “fear of me in their hearts so that they might not turn (away) from me” (32:40).

Several observations are in order. First, the expected time of this restoration is undoubtedly the postexilic period. Second, one would expect that the returnees would have a Davidic king and not be ruled by foreigners any longer. Other expectations include prosperity, covenantal relationship with God mediated by Levitical priests and sacrifices, and ultimately the obedience and loyalty of the people. Overall, it seems that this time of restoration, which includes the “new covenant,” is very much like how things *should* have been before under the earlier covenant. There is, however, one important distinction: the people will be fully committed to the Lord.⁷¹ They will all covenantally know the Lord and have him as their God. Jeremiah 30–33 depicts an ideal time or golden era that is, perhaps, in some ways reminiscent of the days of David⁷² yet made better through their complete loyalty, rather than a totally new covenant. That expectation fits with the expectations of other passages that depict the hope of restoration and covenant renewal after a period of exile (e.g., Lev 26:40–45, Deut 30:1–6, 1 Kgs 8:46–53).⁷³

B. The Prophecies Were Canceled and New Divine Decisions Were Made

In the light of the biblical texts that depict the postexilic era, it must be admitted that the restoration described in Jer 30–33 does not seem to have been realized.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Cf. J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 581; Waltke, “Phenomenon of Conditionality,” 137; Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 269–72.

⁷² The referent for the Davidic king in Jer 30:9 is David himself (also Ezek 34:23 and Hos 3:5; see Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 348).

⁷³ As John E. Goldingay has observed, these passages do not claim that exile would terminate the covenant (*Daniel*, WBC 30 [Dallas: Word, 1989], 234). In Leviticus, the expectation is that, if the people confess their sin and humble themselves before God, God will remember his covenant with them, while in Deuteronomy and Kings the expectation is that God will restore them when they return to the Lord with their whole heart and mind, seeking him in prayer. See Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament*, Siphut 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 465–70; Waltke, “Phenomenon of Conditionality,” 135–36.

⁷⁴ Cf. Allen, *Jeremiah*, 360.

Scholars have offered many explanations for this, but the nature and function of prophecy and divination in Mesopotamia and the Bible suggest something different. If a future prophecy is given and it does not come to pass, then the natural assumption of an ancient Mesopotamian or Judean would be that the prophecy has been canceled and the gods have changed their minds, whether for their own reasons or because of human response, and that they have made a different decision. The suggestion that these future prophecies failed results from faulty assumptions that misunderstand or underestimate the importance of ancient Near Eastern divination for interpreting biblical prophecy. Robert P. Carroll, for example, does not consider ancient Near Eastern perspectives of divination and instead psychologically analyzes the biblical prophetic traditions using cognitive dissonance theory.⁷⁵ In this vein of thinking, the preexilic prophets were merely clever prognosticators who were not able to see what was coming beyond the exile,⁷⁶ and the scholarly goal becomes explaining what social, political, traditional, and psychological factors led the prophets to say what they did when they did.⁷⁷ While this line of inquiry is not entirely without merit, it undeniably forces modern assumptions, perspectives, and valuations onto divinatory and prophetic texts recorded by ancient people who, in light of the biblical and Mesopotamian evidence, were clearly thinking about divination in a very different way.

The suggestion that these prophecies were of a distant future—in fact several hundred years into the future, referring vaguely or directly to events described in the New Testament⁷⁸—but given in the cultural garb of the day⁷⁹ completely overlooks the obvious and repeatedly referenced context that this restoration is to come when the people are gathered from the nations and returned to the land, that is, the postexilic era. This point also argues against the idea that the fulfillment of these “promises” awaits the eschaton.⁸⁰ To be clear, although the vast majority of biblical prophecies refer to events in the near future, there is no reason to believe that it was impossible for prophecy to refer to events many years in advance (cf. Ezek. 12:27).⁸¹ But the point here is that Jer 30–33 repeatedly indicates *a particular time* in which

⁷⁵ Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed*, esp. 86–128. See also Peter R. Ackroyd, “Continuity and Discontinuity: Rehabilitation and Authentication,” in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (London: SPCK, 1977), 215–34; cf. John Kessler, “Tradition, Continuity and Covenant in the Book of Haggai: An Alternative Voice from Early Persian Yehud,” in *Tradition in Transition: Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 in the Trajectory of Hebrew Theology*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Michael H. Floyd, LHBOTS 475 (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 1–39.

⁷⁶ E.g., Carroll states that “one grave deficiency of the prophetic critique was its inability to be as equally successful in prophesying salvation for the future” (*When Prophecy Failed*, 36).

⁷⁷ E.g., Ackroyd, “Continuity and Discontinuity,” 215.

⁷⁸ E.g., Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 196–97; Kidner, *Jeremiah*, 104, 110–15; cf. Allen, *Jeremiah*, 360, 371; Block, *Covenant*, 283, 516–30.

⁷⁹ E.g., Kidner, *Jeremiah*, 115.

⁸⁰ E.g., Goldingay, *Book of Jeremiah*, 658.

⁸¹ The expectation that prophecies would be fulfilled in the near future seems to be the norm

these events would take place. The importance of the priests and sacrifices in these passages also calls into question interpretations that connect these texts to a covenant inaugurated by Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the assurances given in these chapters (Jer 31:35–37, 33:19–26) are specific to the continuation of Israel as a nation (31:35–37) as well as the continuation of the Davidic and priestly lines (33:19–26) so that the promises of the covenant will never falter.⁸² Just as the celestial bodies maintain their God-given order and covenant, so shall these prophecies stand firm; and so they did in the postexilic era, as Israel was certainly a nation and the descendants of David and Levi returned to the land of Israel. But these assurances are only for the prophecies that appear in these units (i.e., specifically 31:35–37, 33:19–26).

It might be suggested that the prophecies of Jer 30–33 were partially fulfilled. But the problem with that proposal is that it does not line up with the ancient Near Eastern perspective of divination or the testimony of the biblical texts.⁸³ Certain parts of these prophecies were realized in the postexilic era: for example, the Israelites were gathered from the nations and returned to the land (31:8, 32:37; cf. 23:3, 29:10); they bought and sold land again (32:42–44); and the Levitical priests were ministering before the Lord (33:18). Other parts, such as having a Davidic king (30:8–9, 33:15–16; cf. 23:4–6), no longer being under foreign rule (30:8–9), and living in loyal obedience to God (31:33–34, 32:39–41), were not realized. When there is a substantial difference—that is, a difference that cannot be accounted for by the distinction of “transparent” and “translucent” fulfillment⁸⁴—between the prophecy and its fulfillment, it is not considered a partial fulfillment but rather a reflection of a changed and therefore different divine decision.⁸⁵ The illusion of

based on comparison with Mesopotamian divination, which, as noted above, had a “shelf life” that was usually not much more than a year.

⁸²Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2002), 444–46; Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 199, 230. Holladay refers to these as “divine guarantees” (230). Contra Kidner, who considers these prophecies to be guarantees with or without assurances (*Jeremiah*, 110–12); cf. Block, *Covenant*, 283–87.

⁸³The expression “biblical texts” here refers to texts that describe or depict the nature and function of prophecy and those that describe the postexilic period.

⁸⁴D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 140–55, 184. Essentially, the “translucent” fulfillment of prophecy is a rather vague fulfillment, while “transparent” fulfillment is more directly connected to the words or figures used in the prophecy. Though this has proven to be a helpful distinction, it does not account for the differences between the prophecies of Jer 30–33 and what happened in the exilic period. The fact that there was no Davidic king at all in the postexilic era and this fact alone—though others could be added to it—pushes beyond the boundaries of a “translucent” fulfillment. The king may not live up to everything he could or ought to have, but there must be a Davidic king for any kind of fulfillment.

⁸⁵Contra Carroll, who believes that such changes in prophecy are human attempts at correcting earlier prophecies (*When Prophecy Failed*, 177–79; cf. Ackroyd, “Continuity and

partial fulfillments is a result of the overlap of the canceled decision and the later decision that replaced it.

Given the fact that the prophecies of Jer 30–33 were not fulfilled in the post-exilic era, the most natural assumption from an ancient Near Eastern perspective is that the prophecies were canceled and that a different divine decision was made. Since some of the prophecies were fulfilled, the new divine decision is to be understood as on the same trajectory as Jeremiah's prophecies but diminished in grandeur and blessing, particularly regarding the Davidic king, because of poor human response. According to Lev 26:40–45, Deut 30:1–6, and 1 Kgs 8:46–53, the expectation for those who would return from exile is that they would return to the Lord in humility with their whole heart and soul, confessing their sin and seeking him in prayer (see above). However, the biblical literature describing the exilic and postexilic eras testifies that these expectations were not met.⁸⁶ The consistent testimony of texts such as Ezekiel, Deutero-Isaiah, Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Daniel is that the hearts of God's people were very much metaphorically uncircumcised (cf. Deut 30:5–6).⁸⁷

III. TOWARD THE DIVINATORY VALUE OF CANCELED PROPHECY IN THE BIBLE

I have argued that the best interpretation of the prophecies of restoration in Jer 30–33 (except the prophecies with assurances) is that ancient Judeans would have understood them to be canceled. This raises the question of the value of canceled prophecies. As described above, the divinatorial (or revelatory) value of a written prophecy is not in its fulfillment (or lack thereof) but rather in the very fact that it has been incorporated into a divinatorial text. Fulfilled prophecies are included in such texts not because of their "historical" value⁸⁸ but because of their new meaning for the generations of people who value them as divinatorial. Canceled prophecies of judgment help the audience discern God's response to sin and give an idea of how God might view that particular sin and might punish it and similar sins in the future. They also function as a warning to all who consider the text to have

Discontinuity," 215). Carroll's view, however, has no theological relevance for the world of divination as found in Mesopotamia or the Bible.

⁸⁶See John S. Bergsma, "The Persian Period as Penitential Era: The 'Exegetical Logic' of Daniel 9:1–27," in *Exile and Restoration Revisited: Essays on the Babylonian and Persian Periods in Memory of Peter R. Ackroyd*, ed. Gary N. Knoppers, Lester L. Grabbe, with Dierdre N. Fulton, LSTS 73 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 50–64, here 60–61.

⁸⁷The interpretation argued here has apparent implications for the interpretation of other prophetic texts, not least of which are Haggai and Zechariah. I intend to address these (and other) related texts in a separate study.

⁸⁸Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 100–104.

divinatory value to avoid that sin and/or repent of it. Canceled prophecies of judgment may also show the efficaciousness of repentance and prayer. In cases of blessing or restoration, God revealed the divine desires for the people and the nations, and the relationship God intended to have with them. Canceled prophecies teach the audience about God's past responses and desires and point on a trajectory toward how God might respond to sin and what God might desire for these people and the world in the future. Biblical prophecy is to be understood to have new divinatory significance that goes far beyond its original historical context to the contexts of the many generations following who valued these texts. As a result, a canceled prophecy is like a canceled omen, as the latter is expected to reveal the same decision of the gods every time the sign appears. In other words, biblical prophecies create patterns for recognizing, understanding, and even anticipating the work of God.

Canceled prophecies also reveal in part how God intends to fulfill the divine promises given in the covenants. The promises of God are irrevocable and unchanging. Prophecies of restoration and blessing, however, such as those in Jer 30–33, reflect divine decisions that are in line with the promises of God but are merely potential installments of the benefits of the promises. As a result, when these prophecies were canceled, the promises to which they pointed were not nullified, but that generation missed their opportunity to enjoy the installment that was offered. This explains not only the similarity of canceled prophecies from the eighth century down to the fifth century BCE, but also why the only prophecies in Jer 30–33 that were given assurances are directly connected to the covenantal promises—specifically, the continued existence of the nation of Israel and the Davidic and Levitical lines (31:35–37, 33:19–26). These are absolutely necessary for the ultimate fulfillment of the promises of God given in the covenants. Regardless of whether the people would respond and receive the blessing of all these prophecies, the endurance of the seed of Abraham, David, and Levi was required.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I have outlined a new comparative approach to biblical prophecy and its fulfillment in light of its ancient Near Eastern divinatory context. Mesopotamian and biblical divination (including biblical prophecy) is, unless qualified by an assurance or oath, inherently conditional. Divinatory revelations reflect divine decisions that are often based either (a) on the past and/or current course of human relationship and response to the divine or (b) on the desires of the divine. The portended future events are “shadows of things that may be only” that function as warnings or hopes of what may be, giving the audience the necessary information to make right decisions. Divination accessed through technical and intuitive methods may be canceled by human response or a change in divine will. Nevertheless,

when omens or prophecies are canceled, they continue to have significance for the communities that believe they are legitimate forms of access to the knowledge of the divine. This is especially true of written forms of prophecy, which, once written, take on a new life of meaning that extends well beyond the original historical context of the prophecy.

This comparative view results in a better understanding of biblical prophecy and its (non)fulfillment and shows the explanatory power of this approach using Jer 30–33 as an example. I have argued that Judean readers would have understood the prophecies in these chapters to be canceled (except 31:35–37, 33:19–26) and that a new decision or new decisions were given to take the place of these prophecies in the postexilic era. Yet these prophecies continue to have great significance, revealing patterns of how God responds to sin and how God intends to bless and dwell among the people, for generations of readers who believe that this text has divinatory value.

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